Ungoogleable: In Search of Digital Feminisms

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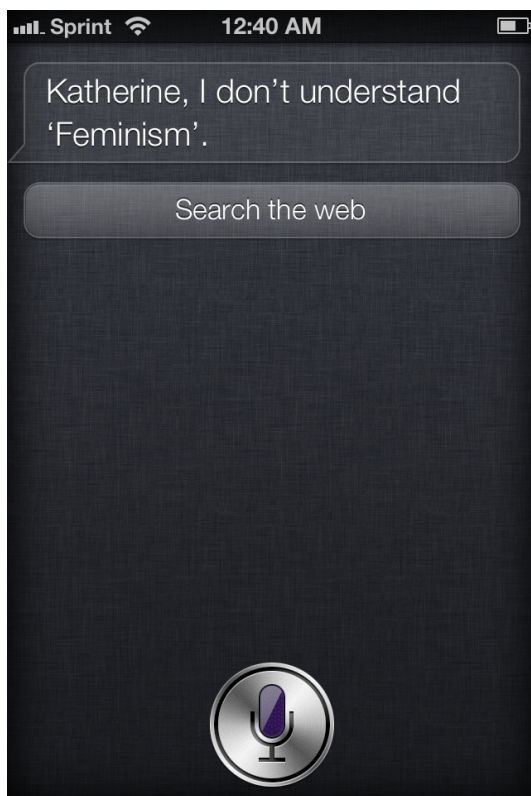
We begin our search for *digital feminisms* with the following terms: an acknowledgment that "search" represents an ambition which must fail. Siri's failed searches only scratch at the surface that Siri is.

Search—with the reductiveness of its pointed directionality, the abhorrent popularity contests of its hegemonic algorithms [1], and the colonizing impulse of its corporate giants [2]—is an easy scapegoat for the paucity of contemporary digital expression and for techno-culture's diminished returns. Search has become a stand-in fall guy for those among us who feel nostalgic for the more leisurely experience of Web 1.0, for a bygone time when users surfed the web, encountering the populism of what Olia Lialina calls the web's nascent vernacular. Nostalgia for surfing the web is also nostalgia for the open possibilities of a still-undefined terrain—nostalgia for a moment when hierarchies were leveled and multinational corporations stood on the same footing as anyone's home page filled with animated GIFs and neon blinking text. [3] This was the 1990s Net culture that supported cyberfeminism at its height. It may sting a bit for those who miss the old days before the Search Giants came in and everything changed. Digital feminisms should be—must be—"ungoogleable."

The Curiosity of Search.

Where surfing is scenic, searching is teleological. Surfing is to searching as a Situationist dérive is to the utilitarian efficiency of Haussmann. [4]—*Do we want answers or do we want ambiguity?*

But the truth is, we already feel nostalgic for search. If surfing characterized the 1990s, and searching epitomizes the 2000s, then perhaps the 2010s are already embodied by a different relationship to information. At least we can see how search requires inquiry. Search must be ignited by interest, a question, or some active pursuit. The sea change in online culture that we are witnessing with the rise of feed-driven social media makes search look, in comparison, like the good old days. The curiosity of search sounds delightful when compared to the constant consumption and recirculation of only the most popular, most blanched information. Now, instead of pursuing information—through surfing or searching— mediated information comes to us. Heaping up like junk mail, it swallows us with the constant distraction of its feeds.

Social media ensnares us in the complacency of reposting/liking/tweeting/sharing so that we regurgitate the same. And herein lies the crux of the problem. Precisely this perpetuation of the same, far more than search's superficial readiness to define, will prove deadly if we hope to encounter, and indeed engender, the multiplicity and difference that digital feminisms require.

Radar.

To be in search of digital feminisms means searching like radar: call and response. Here, a call for papers. And here, hear responses. Echoing back as we grope about in the dark, drawn to a blinking cursor. Echoing from unknown depths (startling the search party). Reverberating from all around, like surround sound, in

three hundred and sixty degrees. Responses hinting at a shape. At the lay of the land.

In this (test) case, perhaps a wiser question is: if we encounter digital feminisms, will we recognize them? Or is "digital feminisms" rather *a search tool itself*, a crimper to kink the trajectory of search, which shunts us off in a new direction, away from an easy answer, or, precisely away from the singularity of *an answer*.

d) All of the ~~Above~~ Below.

What we are searching for, really, is diversity. A way to break the loop of the same feed, feeding the same. Our search for digital feminisms is a search for difference, reflected here in the varied perspectives each contribution to this collection adopts in its unique approach to the topic. Grant Taylor's essay, " 'Up for Grabs': Agency, Praxis, and the Politics of Early Digital Art," opens this compendium with an examination of the experiences of women artists, who as pioneers in digital art, were among the first to straddle two male-dominated fields—the notoriously sexist world of engineering, and the hegemonic old boy's club of the institutionalized (and technophobic) art world. Surprisingly, Taylor reveals how, in this doubly masculinized setting, women artists were able to thrive. "In the formative years," he writes, "social norms proved to be more fluid and gender barriers remained unconstructed." Taylor's careful historical study explores the conditions that created a fertile window of opportunity during which digital art was "up for grabs."

Jumping ahead from an early history of digital art to a sociology of digital creativity, Sol Morén's essay brings us next into the present day. In "Digital Gender & Aesthetic Technology," Morén details her observations of girl bloggers in Sweden. Where Taylor's essay focuses on a moment in the history of digital art before gender norms became entrenched, Morén analyzes how gender norms are now constructed and perpetuated with and around technology. Her study explores the complex negotiations young women face in the course of their self-determination with technology. Morén highlights how women's "becoming technical" challenges "digital gender norms." "Becoming technical," in effect, she expounds, threatens the "dichotomist order" that is based on male and female characteristics being each other's opposites with the potential that being "technical could no longer be regarded as a male trait." Her research has led her to develop a theory she terms "aesthetic technology" to understand how girls approach technology artistically, and differently from boys. Girls' "becoming technical," she finds, both complicates digital gender and highlights the complexities of self-perception and agency for girls and women in *homosocial* networks, both online and in real life.

The question of self-forming (and deforming) identity is at the heart of the next essay in this collection by performance artist, technologist, and cultural theorist, Praba Pilar. *BOT I*, Pilar's contribution, appears here as a performance script accompanied by a portfolio of photographs. *BOT I* is a radical monologic mash-up of autobiographical material from Pilar's childhood in a computing family and her passions for and against technology, cut in and through the texts of Samuel Beckett's "Not I" and Isaac Asimov's *I Robot*. Ruthless in its refusal of all gentility and tact, and insistent in its feminist critique, Pilar's script reveals the blind spots that capitalist techno-culture reserves for ethics and the body.

In Pilar's *BOT I*, we experience the struggle of a complex, multivocal entity, and the artists featured in the next essay, by curator Jillian Hernandez, embrace multiplicity and proliferation as strategies in their interrogations of identity. In "Mediations on the Multiple: On Plural Subjectivity and Gender in Recent New Media Art Practice," Hernandez invites several artists from her multi-venue 2009 exhibition *Losing Yourself in the 21st Century* into conversations about their work. [5] As technology often plays a crucial role in these works, Hernandez is careful to remind us that "it is not just a play of identity that is facilitated by technology but more importantly the modes of communicating how gendered and racialized subjects escape and are in excess of social constructions." In assessing the forms these artists engage, Hernandez speculates that "[p]erhaps contemporary women-identified artists find assemblages of subjectivity and subjectlessness productive for cultural critique; amalgams of bodies, intensities, sensations, and affects that stimulate-away the coherence of any one self." The tapestry of voices that emerges in this text reflects the decentered, inconclusive process of gendered subject formation and the ongoing negotiation of identity.

Kyoo Lee's "In Search of www.analogfeminism.net: Starting with Three Contrarian Concepts via Mother-Daughter Machines to Come" provides the apt conclusion to this collection. Lee sends us tracing our steps, back to before where we began. Skating from René Descartes to Kara Walker, she asks us "to go gray between zeroes and ones." Reverting from the digital to its ancestral digit, a finger, Lee uses text and textuality to point out a multiplicity of directions, all of which refrain from a directive. In a series of "posts" negotiating, inheritance, reference, and influence, the daughter searching for the mother returns to sender.

From this circuitous ending, which takes us back before the beginning, we come to a revised query: What is an anti-search engine? How to implement the algorithm for this unfindable query?

Postscript to the Introduction.

"On the road map you won't drive off the edge of your known world. In space as I want to imagine it, you just might."—Doreen Massey [6]

Where is the next way out when the rhizome eats itself in a vicious cycle of feeds? We need not just one twisting tunnel—this is a search for multiplicities, for simultaneous and contradictory paths.

The question of search is also a question of space. Search takes place within and across space, seeking points and nodes and defining pathways and connections across landscapes of data. Search is confined by space and its operation is determined by the shape of its information territories. How do we find the gray areas in digital spaces built from binary patterns of zeroes and ones in stark black and white? The dualistic logic seems deeply ingrained. However, just as in chaos theory, massive scale and iteration may open the door to unpredictable results. Search engine logic and social media feeds are like gravity wells, locking us into their orbits. The space of the Net becomes neatly partitioned and delineated. Instead, we need strange attractors and the complex folds of chaotic boundary conditions. We need a new map.

In her critique of Western cartography, geographer Doreen Massey grapples with the closed structure of the map, which erases both the encounter with difference and the possibility of surprise.

Instead, she argues for what she terms "the chance of space," which allows for disruption, accidental juxtaposition, and multiple voices in continually shifting configurations. The chance of space is primarily defined not by external forces but by the multiple trajectories within it. This suggests that our search must operate not just by seeking an alternate space, but by actively creating it. Like the infinitely unpredictable plot of a point within the Mandelbrot set, search traverses a space and also shapes it. The trail traces a new space, or perhaps a reconfiguration of an existing space, which again has room for the unexpected and the unknown.

A different sort of space, a different sort of search: an anti-search engine with an alternate algorithm.

A reverse-look-up tool for blind searches, or for searching without results, without finding them.

A search tool for an ("unknown" || "unknowable" || "moving") && "target." Searching not to find, but to be found.

References

1. **Helen Nissenbaum, "How Computer Systems Embody Values," in *IEEE Computer* 34, no. 3 (March 2001), 120, 118-199.**

2. **Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Googlization of Everything: (And Why We Should Worry)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).**

3. **Olia Lialina, "A Vernacular Web," in *Digital Folklore: To computer users, with love and respect*, eds. Olia Lialina and Dragan Espenschied (Stuttgart: merz & solitude, 2009), 19-34.**

4. **French urban planner and designer Baron Haussmann is known for rebuilding post-revolutionary Paris. His renovations modernized the city, replacing its old network of twisting, labyrinthine streets with a straight, gridded plan featuring open, wide boulevards.**

5. **_Losing Yourself in the 21st Century_ was exhibited at the Welch Gallery at Georgia State University in Atlanta (October–December 2009) and at Maryland Art Place in Baltimore (February–March 2010).**

6. **Doreen Massey, *For Space* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 111.**